

The
Economist

The party and the media

Learning to spin

At a Communist Party training school, functionaries learn how to handle more aggressive news media

Feb 8th 2014 | SHANGHAI | From the print edition

IT WAS not a typical government press conference. A journalist had asked a mayor some pointed questions about the safety of a paraxylene chemical factory planned for her city—the same type of plant that has prompted environmental protests around China. The mayor dodged the question in standard government-speak when the reporter, a portly man in a checked shirt and blue jeans, rudely interrupted her: “Please answer my question directly.” The room erupted with laughter.



This was, it turns out, a class at the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong (CELAP) in Shanghai—one of five national schools for training Communist Party members. The “mayor” and the “journalist” were both low-level officials from Zhengzhou, an inland city, simulating a real-life situation in a class teaching functionaries how to cope with today’s media.

The party still exerts firm control when it comes to anything sensitive. But outside politics the media landscape has changed completely. Consumer programmes, investigative reporters and a noisy mix of microbloggers and middle-class NIMBYs are holding the party more to account. The classes at CELAP demonstrate that the leadership has understood what is at stake, even if it is still learning how to deal with it. Some of the party’s biggest recent problems have come from mishandling the newly probing media.

The message of the classes is clear: officials must be more responsive to the press and the public even as they toe the party line. Environmental protests, angry villagers talking to global media and spokesmen stumbling in news conferences have become teaching opportunities.

“In the past we could avoid the press...we could remain silent, but now we can no longer avoid it,” Tan Wenzhu, a lecturer, told a group of 40 officials from Heilongjiang province. Mr Tan showed the class a photograph and a mocking cartoon of an official who attended the scene of a grisly road accident in 2012 and was photographed smiling and sporting a luxury watch. He became known as “Brother Watch”, the punchline of online jokes and a liability to the party. He was soon out of a job. “I hope none of you will bring shame on the party and the government with your own problems,” intoned Mr Tan.

Of the party’s 85m members, many of whom are officials and civil servants, fewer than 100,000 have so far received training from the Shanghai academy since it opened in 2005 (plus 4,000 foreigners, from Venezuelan socialists to Russian bureaucrats). The party’s powerful organisation department arranges classes for senior officials, who must attend 110 hours of training a year at one of the national schools. Local governments also send their officials on courses.

The staid Central Party School in Beijing is the most coveted place of study, with the best reputation. CELAP is next of the five. Near the gated entrance on Expectation Road (named by the school), the low-slung main building is meant to resemble a Chinese scholar’s desk, and the tower rising from it a penholder. Eight dormitory buildings, designed to look like the scholar’s folding books, are spread out over a sprawling leafy campus, including an artificial lake with ducks and swans. Officials stay in two-room suites, each stocked with a desktop computer, a two-volume history of the Communist Party and an English phrase-book of 800 useful statements for foreign audiences (“We attach great importance to protection of intellectual property rights and take it as a national strategy.” “We will continue to expand trade with your country. In particular, we encourage Chinese enterprises to import more from your country.”)

Young guns, new canon

In class, turgid canonical teachings of the party must all be represented: Marx, Mao and “Deng Xiaoping Theory”. But CELAP has a light attachment to doctrine compared with other party schools. Students are taught to “de-politicise” their language in times of crisis, at least in dealing with the public. Charged ideological phrases like “hostile Western forces” will not be helpful at the scene of a domestic disaster. Government jargon should be dropped, too. Liu Ning, a television presenter for Shanghai Media Group, helps coach the officials, telling them to speak in plain language, use humour to deflect tough questions, and refrain from boasting about how good a job the government is doing. That will only invite ridicule, she says.

One Chinese official everyone wants to avoid emulating is Wang Yongping, a railway ministry spokesman who made a mess of a news conference after a high-speed-train crash in 2011 that killed 40 people in south-east China. Mr Wang was mocked online for claiming that pieces of the train were buried to help the rescue effort (microbloggers suspected it was to cover up evidence). “He was not fully prepared and he kept making explanations...based on his own speculation,” Li De, a lecturer, tells his students, a photo of the hapless Mr Wang on a screen behind him.

Mr Wang's first mistake, though, was that he was not dressed formally enough. Instructors repeatedly stressed the importance of watching not just words, but also appearance. Women should wear skin-coloured stockings, not black, and definitely no fishnets. For men, Mr Li said, red ties are acceptable on happy occasions. "But if your boss is wearing a red tie, you should not. Don't steal the show."

From the print edition: China